DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 012 FL 017 809

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TITLE Putting Grammar in Its Place in the Writing Curriculum.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (22nd, Chicago, IL, March 8-13, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; Course Content; Educational Strategies; *English (Second Language); *Grammar; Language Processing; *Revision (Written Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes

ABSTRACT

The process approach to writing instruction views learning to write as a discovery process in which the writer makes connections beyond the text. Central to this process is revision, the refinement and development of the discoveries made. This approach appears to be incompatible with the grammar-based approach traditionally used in English-as-a-Second Language instruction. However, grammar can be integrated into the process-oriented approach at the editing stage of the writing curriculum, without inhibiting the initial expression of ideas. At this point, grammar can be contextualized by presenting structures that the students are likely to use in their writing assignments, and grammatical exercises will be more meaningful to the students as they mirror the rhetorical style of the student material in question. Students are more open to learning grammar at this stage because they can apply it meaningfully and immediately. In addition, correct grammatical forms can be modeled in written texts. This approach allows for both fluency of expression and grammatical accuracy. (Author/MSE)

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ED304012

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Putting Grammar in its Place In the Writing Curriculum

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At one time it was a popular notion held by writing teachers that in order to learn to write, one had to learn to outline first (Warriner, 1957). Recent research on what people actually do when they write has suggested, to the contrary, that writing is more a thinking and re-thinking task, a process of formulating and reformulating ideas rather than a linear, step-by step task. As a result, it can be a chaotic, recursive and creative procedure which is unique to the individual (Emig, 1971; Perl, 1980; Zamel, 1982).

According to this latter view, learning to write is a discovery process in which the writer makes connections beyond the text. Sometimes planning is involved, but often insights come unexpectedly during the act of writing itself. Central to this process is the concept of revision, that is, the power to refine and develop the discoveries made. At one time, revision was never taught in writing classes, neither ESL nor mainstream (Warriner, 1957). If rewriting was ever done, it was in the form of attention to mechanical aspects of form; thus it was more like editing than revising. As far as organization was concerned, students were taught to fit their composition ideas into a number of existing templates of the so-called "ideal essay". As a result, students who wrote more than one draft tended to focus mainly on editing form rather than revising content. The problem with this approach, as Flower and Hayes (1981) point out, is that

focusing first on form interferes with the generation of ideas. For this reason, the ESL student must be taught to attend to content as well as to form.

However, simultaneously attending to ideas, as well as grammar and punctuation, can be difficult and also distracting from the idea-generation and idea-organization processes. ESL students sometimes attempt to attend to both these things when they feel the need to present themselves as native speakers so as to avoid the embarrassment of sounding foreign. Fear of making mistakes impedes free flow of expression. To overcome this problem, they must be taught that because of the importance of the communication of ideas, form (i.e., grammar) without substance (i.e., ideas) is meaningless. Form tends to develop naturally when one's primary focus is the communication of ideas.

This is not to say that grammar, spelling and punctuation should not be a concern. Many ESL students, even those with a fair degree of fluency of expression, have a woefully inadequate command of English grammar. Their ideas are very often obscured due to the unintelligibility caused by severe grammatical problems. Within the process of communicating ideas on paper, grammar should be taught. The question is, how? The teaching of grammar is highly controversial.

While Hillocks (1987), in his review of the relevant research on native speakers, concludes that grammar has no effect

on the quality of students' writing, it may be that it is the way that grammar is taught that is crucial, not simply whether or not it is taught. For this reason, we find conflicting findings on the subject throughout the research literature. For example, in a study of the teaching of English grammar to native speakers in New Zealand, two hundred students in eight matched classes were assessed, taught and reassessed over a three-year period by three different teachers who held diverse pedagogical biases. Each group was exposed to a different methodology: a transformational grammar course, a reading-writing (holistic) course and a traditional grammar-exercise textbook-based course. The study concluded that "formal instruction in grammar has no influence on the language growth of typical high school students" (Elley, 1975). However, the results are not surprising when one considers that decontextualized grammatical approaches were used such as can be found in traditional grammatical texts which make use of isolated sentence type exercises, such as the controlled-composition approach.[1] This perspective on teaching grammar has its roots in the `60s, when the audiolingual method was used widely to teach grammatical structures. Drills, or "pattern practices" (Brooks, 1967; Fries, 1958), attempted to train ESL students in grammatically "correct" English. This approach had been adapted to the teaching of composition as "controlled writing exercises," in which the student is directed in a series of manipulations

using the targeted grammatical structures (Robinson, 1965; Bander, 1980). Although the goal of using these manipulations was to help students memorize grammatical patterns that would eventually be expressed in self-directed, spontaneous written communication, the language acquisition literature suggests that this result does not necessarily follow (Krashen, 1981).

Examining a different approach, that of integrating grammatical focus with the teaching of writing, numerous studies have investigated the effects of teachers' written feedback on students' structural errors. Dicker and Sheppard (1985) studied the effect of multiple drafts on structural accuracy. According to their findings, writing drafts did not improve accuracy even when feedback was given on grammatical errors. Robby, Ross and Shortreed (1986) studied different forms of error feedback (i.e., direct, as opposed to indirect feedback where the student needs to do most of the work in identifying errors and correcting them) and found that there was no significant difference between types of feedback as far as quality of students' writing was concerned. In contrast, LaLande (1982) found that students who received indirect feedback (i.e., they found their own errors following a code of symbols) did significantly better than students who received purely direct feedback (i.e., when the teacher overtly pointed out the errors and the correction). Furthermore, Corder (1981) and Brumfit (1980) hypothesize that viewing error-correction

as problem-solving helps learners to retain feedback. Although the findings in this area of research have also been conflicting, it would still seem that some degree of success in improving students' structural accuracy may be achieved when they are directed to attend to grammar not only in context in a general sense, but also in the specific context of their own written expression.

Returning to the question of how best to teach grammar within a composition process approach, one may look to communicative competence models of second language acquisition (Sauvignon, 1986) which have encouraged the teaching of grammatical structures through communication. This approach could be extended to the teaching of writing; that is, when ESL students communicate in writing, the grammatical structures they need at that time could be formally taught and learned. To achieve this aim, the grammatical section should be contextualized in the editing process by presenting structures that the writers are likely to use in their writing assignments, as Raimes (1987) has done. The grammatical exercises presented at this point will be more meaningful and relevant to the students as they mirror the rhetorical style of the material at hand. When the students are at the editing stage they are open to learning the grammar which is being presented, since they can apply what they have learned meaningfully and immediately at this point (i.e., apply the grammar in order to

improve the effectiveness of their own written communication).

Furthermore, the correct forms of grammar would be modeled in written texts. Let us say that the students are studying the narrative mode of writing. The procedure might be to give the students a narrative to read. The students would then write narratives of their own based on similar or related topics. Then, the past tense verb form, which most narratives contain, could be pointed out. Next, supplementary exercises could be done in class or at home in order to reinforce the irregular past tense verb forms. Finally, the students would edit for past tense verb errors in their written narratives.

In summary, the writing process approach charges us as teachers to make students aware of the fact that the idea stage of writing should come first. The revising and the seeking out of errors should follow. In this way, students will be less likely to become too self-conscious about these errors while working on the composing stage. This approach is desirable so that the expression of ideas does not become inhibited. At the same time, however, we must not abandon our obligation to guide them in their development of grammatical accuracy in English. We must promote both aims. However we must order our presentations in such a way that, rather than interfering with each other's development, fluency of expression and grammatical accuracy are both allowed to progress.

Endnotes

1. There is, on the other hand, some evidence that second language learners who are overconscientious and who overuse the internal Monitor may use even the dullest of exercises as "meaningful input" as they acquire the target language (Krashen, 1982). This claim refers to oral language, but the same could be true of written discourse. In fact, it would be expected to be more applicable to written discourse since there is more time to monitor output when one writes as opposed to when one speaks. However, the number of students who would be able to benefit from such grammatical exercises would be limited to those who are over-monitor users. It is logical to assume then that for most learners, the more meaningfully the grammatical structures are presented, the more they are likely to be learned and retained as Stevick (1980) claims.

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